

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY**  
**2023/24 SEASON**



**PRETTY RED DRESS**  
(Language: English)

Director: Dionne Edwards, 2022. Running time: 110 minutes.  
Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 15 November 2023.

*“Terrific performances from Natey Jones, Alexandra Burke and Temilola Olatunbosun match this tender drama about masculinity.”*

“There’s warmth, humour, sadness and tenderness in this big-hearted feature debut from writer-director Dionne Edwards. It’s a movie about masculinity that could have been solemn and prescriptive; instead it’s pulsing with humanity, thanks in great part to tremendous performances from its leads Natey Jones, Alexandra Burke and smart newcomer Temilola Olatunbosun.

Burke is already known as the West End performer, recording star and X Factor winner; she plays Candice, a singer about to land the role of a lifetime playing Tina Turner in a big musical – just a few more audition rounds to go. But she has problems: teen daughter Kenisha (Olatunbosun) is in trouble at school, and her partner, Travis (Jones) is just out of prison on licence, his ankle tag giving him a strange and sinister limp.

Travis was a DJ and music entrepreneur before crime dragged him down: he was going to be the Jay-Z to Candice’s Beyoncé. On the face of it, Travis is a scary tough guy, whose mere presence quietens some lairy boys making too much noise on their estate. But Travis is no Ike Turner: he is romantic and gallant and he buys Candice an inspirationally gorgeous red dress for her audition, paying for it by taking a humiliatingly menial job in the pub owned by his overbearing elder brother. That amazing sparkly red dress hangs on the back of their bedroom door, like a ghost or a fetish, almost a new addition to their family. And Travis, with nothing to do all day but hang around the flat on his own, is entranced by the dress’s sensuality, and wonders how that dress would feel if he tried it on himself.

The inevitable watch-it-through-your-fingers moment when Candice comes home unexpectedly early one afternoon is carried off by Jones and Burke with great flair. Travis tries styling it out, claiming he was preparing a wacky panto prank and Burke shows how Candice is shocked, bewildered, angry but infinitesimally ready to be fooled into believing the excuses in order to preserve everything she believed about her partner and their relationship. And there is

more pain when Kenisha is dragged into the cover-up, and perpetuating the secrets and lies.

*Pretty Red Dress* is a movie with a passing resemblance to Julian Jarrold's 2005 comedy *Kinky Boots* with Chiwetel Ejiofor as a drag artist who helps a crisis-hit factory make custom-built shoes with reinforced male-weight-bearing high heels for performers like him. There is in fact a similar issue here: the pretty red dress is not made for a male body like Travis's and it disastrously rips. *Kinky Boots* was converted into a stage musical and it wouldn't be surprising to see *Pretty Red Dress* go the same way with a dozen or so newly written songs, and there's a tailor-made star right there with Burke. But in some ways it would be a shame to risk losing the intimacy and complexity of *Pretty Red Dress* in a theatre version. At all events, this is an intensely likable film with a trio of great performances."

**Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 15 June 2023.**

### **"How *Pretty Red Dress* explores black masculinity**

This confident debut by Dionne Edwards, starring Alexandra Burke, uses clothing to ask questions about liberation and self-expression.

Accessories have a monopoly on magic powers (Harry Potter's invisibility cloak, the mask in *The Mask*). But you don't need to be Edith Head, costume-designer extraordinaire during Hollywood's Golden Age, to know that wardrobe can weave its own spell. A dress in "artery red" proves to be malevolent in Peter Strickland's *In Fabric*, causing everything from washing machine malfunctions to dog attacks. In François Ozon's wondrous short *A Summer Dress*, a crimson-and-blue floral number inflames the desire of a teenage boy who has no choice but to wear it when his clothes are stolen.

The garment in *Pretty Red Dress*, a confident feature-length debut from the writer-director Dionne Edwards, contains elements of both the erotic and the supernatural. A close-up of the dinky little dress hanging on the back of a bedroom door is accompanied by a cymbal hiss – a kind of sonic shimmer to match the sparkle of those glittery sequins and glassy beads. Travis (Natey Jones) peers almost fearfully from beneath the duvet as the camera creeps towards the object of his attention. The effect is straight out of a horror film: the fabric seems to be staring back at him.

Recently released from prison, Travis lives in south London with Candice (Alexandra Burke) and their teenage daughter, Kenisha (Temilola

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Olatunbosun). Candice works on a supermarket checkout but dreams of becoming a singer. Her framed Motown posters line every wall of their flat, and it's her upcoming audition to play Tina Turner that prompts Travis to splash out on the glamorous gift in the first place. (She performs "Proud Mary", which Burke previously jived to in a pretty silver dress on *Strictly Come Dancing*.) Not that there isn't something in it for Travis. While everyone else is out, he steps gingerly into the dress in his white-socked feet, electronic ankle tag and all, then reaches for Candice's lipstick. At no point does he ditch the beard: it's part of the ensemble that expresses who he is. Candice inevitably discovers him in her frock but the revelation plays out in unusual ways for both. Jones, richly legible here in his first lead role, portrays Travis cycling through a variety of excuses, as though he were trying on different shades of lippy. First, he says he was high. Then that it was just a "lickle prank". As he sheepishly returns the dress to its place among Candice's other clothes, the camera lurks behind the hangers looking out at him – a visual pun that puts the audience in the closet.

The conventional danger in any post-prison narrative is recidivism, as hinted at by Travis's demurral when his old friends embrace him: "Tryna keep it narrow," he says. Narrow maybe, but hardly straight. Even before he wriggles into the dress, he and Candice are pushing boundaries in bed. "Who's my little bitch?" she purrs, providing the first of three instances in which that word is directed at a member of this family. "Turn... I wanna see it... more." The camera stays fixed on her as she makes her demands, leaving us to imagine the rest. Hotter that way.

Edwards's sensual touch was already evident in her 2016 short *We Love Moses*, which considered masculinity and sexual fluidity through the eyes of a 12-year-old girl. What's impressive about the new film is how evenly she distributes its dramatic weight while balancing domestic interiority with razzle-dazzle visuals in a way not typical of recent British cinema. Travis's story is a hook on which the rest of the movie hangs, but Edwards never pretends that his liberation comes without its hazards. Equal emphasis is given to Kenisha, who wonders if her father is "off key" before conceding that she knows how that feels; and to Candice, who is also trying to make her inner and outer selves cohere. Burke's often exasperated line-readings epitomise one of the joys of her performance: even at the end of her tether, she never exhausts her love."

**Ryan Gilbey, *The New Statesman*, 9 June 2023.**

“Dionne Edwards packs a lot into her directorial debut, with the result that there’s a lot here for a lot of audiences in the smashing, sexy *Pretty Red Dress*. Like her leading man, the writer-director dares to be different – and only joy can result in following that goal. Very British and proudly Black, Edwards’ film juggles tones and formats we’ve never seen put together before and it’s a pleasure to see a first-timer flex her muscles in a part-musical, wholly dramatic story of a recently-released prisoner who takes a shine to his partner’s micro red frock.

The film, assisted by the Sundance lab, is a daring gamble. The lead actor, Natey Jones, is unknown. The musical diva that is Alexandra Burke is untried in a major dramatic role. And completing this struggling South London family as their grumpy teenager, Temilola Olatunbosun is also a newcomer. But, with the spirit of Tina Turner – and several of her numbers – guiding this film, Edwards targets the gulf between fantasy and tough, bitter reality in a way that should get some under-served UK audiences (Black/LGBTQ+) on their feet, and more besides.

Edwards directly addresses the macho culture amongst Black men which makes even the idea of cross-dressing unthinkable. But she’s also placing it in the context of proud lives that haven’t worked out: a drug-dealing dad who comes out of prison trying to go clean, and the glamorous, sexy mother who works at a supermarket checkout and whose dreams of starring in a West End musical are suddenly revived. There’s a constant threat here to their security, and a lidded rage that surges inside and between the reunited couple Travis (Jones) and Candice (Burke), as 14-year-old Kenisha (Olatunbosun) looks on, expressing her own anger at school.

That, however, makes *Pretty Red Dress* sound bleak, and this film is anything but. It can be funny; Travis’s insufferable older brother Clive (Rolan Bell) is a pompous monster who is amusing, until he’s not, and their extended family dynamic is well drawn with short strokes. Kenisha’s monosyllabic teenager is so apt, she can be laugh-out-loud funny. Candice’s wild rants veer between eye-rolling amusement and outright anxiety as to what she’ll say next. And Travis’s dalliance with the titular bugle-beaded outfit is a tour-de-force in dramatic tension — apart from the fact that his super-buff post-prison physique and ankle tag will make it a tight fit, he also needs to find a lock for that bedroom door given Kenisha is being suspended from school every second day.

Edwards, DoP [Director of Photography] Adam Scarth and production designer Phoebe Platman find a seductiveness in this every-day council block life, keyed by the red sequins and Candice’s peachy parade of outfits. There’s a fantasy element here, led by the Tina Turner numbers, that shimmies its way into the

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apartment. (After all, how can a supermarket cashier and a bus boy afford to run an Audi, unless it's a leftover from his DJ-and-drug-dealing days; £279 for a pretty red dress is a lot of £8.50 hours.) Candice has lost her confidence, so she builds it from the outside where she's sexy and shiny and hard as her nails. Inside, though, her self-belief is shaken further by Travis's sudden inability to function sexually. But Travis, the ex-prisoner forced through one humiliation after another, has a hard, hard road to follow, inexorably drawn to becoming his true self, no matter the cost.

With Edwards' screenplay taking a frank approach to sex between this couple, challenged by Travis's increased appetite for risk-taking (Abigail Kessel acted as intimacy co-ordinator), both Jones and Burke give honest, unvarnished performances. The way Travis/Jones moves, how he holds himself in and then lets go, brings a physicality that's believable, while the rawness and honesty of the character's internal struggle come from the heart.

Chiwetel Ejifor and Paapa Essiedu (*Kinky Boots* and the short film *Femme* respectively) have walked part of this path as Black actors dealing with a taboo subject in the community, but this is theatre actor Natey Jones's first lead role – and it's a big one. With no significant prior experience in front of the camera, the actor is a revelation and his performance is awards-level, when the time comes. His belief in Travis is such that it should sway audiences into a real understanding of the issues, underneath the dramatic aspects and roller-coaster nature of the character's narrative arc.

Between the high drama, the joy, the laughs, the songs and the fears in *Pretty Red Dress*, there's a moment where Travis literally steps across a threshold and the audience holds its breath with his daring. For Candice too, as she conquers her stage fright to try out for the role of Tina Turner in a scary audition. Dionne Edwards also takes herself over a line with her first film and it's similarly nerve-wracking to see if she'll make it. As her debut shows, people can be many things and a film can dare to be different too; with exhilarating results."

**Fionnuala Halligan, *Screen International*, 10 October 2022.**